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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact that commuting, as part of a professional career lifestyle, has on family relationships. One hundred commuting couples participated in a paper and pencil survey. They responded to questions about coping as a family; dealing with the complications of children; keeping their relationship healthy; and commuting as a viable lifestyle choice. According to the survey, couples adjust and cope successfully by encouraging adaptability within the family; spending quality time with spouse and family; and separating professional life from family life. In terms of keeping their relationship healthy, couples stress the importance of support in one's career and marital relationship; communication; complete mutual trust, and a total commitment to the married state; maturity and stability in the marriage; and commitment to the success of the commuting arrangement and the relationship. With regard to children, couples express concern about satisfactory living and childcare arrangments; the complications of childhood illnesses; the effects of commuting on children; being left out of childrearing through absence; and strained parent-child relationships. Couples who successfully commute choose to accept the strains, guilt, stress, and loneliness as part of a lifestyle that fulfills their needs and values; the gains balance the tradeoffs. (BB)

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COMMUTER FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: ALIVE AND THRIVING

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COMMUTER FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: ALIVE AND THRIVING

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the impact on families of an increasingly common phenomena, the commuting family. It is estimated that this variation on the dual career family now numbers over 700,000. How do they cope as a family? How do couples with children deal with this added complication to an already hectic lifestyle? How do couples keep their relationship healthy? Is commuting a viable lifestyle choice?

METHODOLOGY

One hundred commuting couples participated in a paper and pencil survey (Appendix). The criteria included: the commute was for career reasons (a student or military person-unless both were military-were not included), two homes were maintained and the commute spanned one year during the past five years.

A variety of methods were used to locate couples: university networks across the nation, personal and professional networks, professional journal and newsletter announcements, classified advertisements in several national magazines, and an equity project booklet of nontraditional workers in North Dakota. In addition, a referral system was used. Those surveyed provided additional names which produced the "snowball effect". The sample was not a random sample, consequently, any conclusions from this study are obviously tentative.

DILEMMAS AND JOYS

Commuters are primarily career professionals who share many of the same dilemmas, problems, and joys (but with greater amplification and complications) as dual career couples who reside together. Overall, the couples and families surveyed adjust and cope successfully. Many couples note that they have the best of both worlds, close relationships as well as personal space, independence and privacy. How do they adjust and cope?

Commuting places a premium on adaptability within the family. "Everyone in the family suffered and everyone benefited." "It was a chance to see what we are really made of and what the foundations of our marriage are."

Commuting places a premium on quality time with ones spouse and family and commuters work hard to make this happen. There is even less time available than in a typical personal-professional relationship where time together is already at a premium. Conversely,

this may also lead to enhanced satisfaction with one's spouse. "Because I enjoy devoting so much time free of other distractions and concentrate on my career during the week, it is then romantic and we are really TOGETHER, unfettered by professional demands."

A major concern of commuters is the fear of losing touch with one's spouse and the loss of intimacy and sharing. Companionship, emotional support, and conversation may be missing. Family members are accustomed to sharing the "highs and the lows", and a loss of the "daily rhythm" can lead to a "fragmentation of family life, a feeling that there is too much psychic distance between family members." Will families grow apart rather than together because of this tendency to "go your own way," and "do your own thing? Gertzel and Gross (1984) believe that this sense of loss of psychological intimacy threatens the need for predictability and order in a marriage.

Commuters add an additional element which they describe as "hello-goodbye". It takes time to readjust to each other each time there is a separation. Families need to reestablish bonds by "catching up" on each others' lives especially when work lives and personal lives may not mesh. Gertzel and Gross (1984) note that regular regrouping seems to be more successful than irregular contacts. If there are weekly reunions, the inconvenience is minimized since the weekend pattern is not unlike that of the dual career couple who reside together. In fact, couples may even look forward to a romantic reunion. As time apart increases, there is greater loss of conversation, shared leisure and less physical contact.

Strains of commuting may be placed on the marriage in a variety of ways. Couples may not "hash out problems effectively." "Major conflicts are difficult to work out because there is so little time to resolve them. For newly married couples, it may be difficult to "have a real husband and wife relationship." Loss of daily contact causes sexual intimacy to be reserved for the weekend. "Since we see each other only on weekends, we expect to have sex every time we are together because it is the only time we have." Surprisingly, infidelity does not seem to be a major fear. Only two persons felt there is a "tendency to look for intimacy closer to home" or expressed worry about "what my husband is doing and how he meets his relationship needs." Research indicates that infidelity is one-half what it is in traditional single residence couples (Winfield, 1985). Commuting simply does not lend itself to infidelity. Career commitment, commitment to the intimate relationship, loss of discretionary time and travel do not encourage opportunities. Commuting increases communication as couples must talk about their relationships. Only two of the surveyed couples ended their marriages during the commute; and in both cases, the writer made it clear that the commute was not the cause. If there is already conflict, it will surface regardless of living arrangements.

Commuters adjust and adapt to a livestyle in which relationships and professional obligations must be carefully balanced. They attempt to handle this by compartmentalizing their lives. Couples professional lives are a high priority during the week when they are separated. "Separation from my family is wonderful for the freedom to be totally engaged in my profession during the week." Consequently, the weekend is closely guarded and reserved for personal relationships. Professional obligations are not allowed to interfere when one is with family. Commuting is often described as living two very different lives.

Balancing these two parts of their lives is a difficult part of the commuting. Guilt and stress stalks the professional woman." "I still feel guilty when my job demands that I work until midnight." Maintaining multiple roles; professional, wife, mother, friend, community activitist and personal roles can produce stress. Expectations on the part of others add to this stress when we do not behave in traditional male-female roles (Scanzoni, 1978).

The key is to have "a secure, understanding spouse who is not threatened by their partners achievement. Both must understand the importance of each others careers. They need to realize that relationships thrive only as each thrive as individuals."

KEEPING RELATIONSHIPS HEALTHY

How do couples keep their relationships thriving? It is obvious that commitment to the relationship and to a career is a precondition to a successful commute. While support in one's career is important, support in the relationship is even more necessary for success. In addition, suggestions to increase success included good communication, trust, understanding, respect, flexibility, tolerance, maturity, and a stable marriage. All are needed ingredients of a good marriage but all are needed in greater quantity in commuter marriages.

Most frequently mentioned is the importance of communication. Communication about feelings about the separation seems to be a critical element. Frequent, even daily phone calls play an important part in keeping couples in touch, and help insure good communication. Trust is another major factor for a successful commute. There must be complete trust in one's partner and total commitment to the married state. This includes trust in the decision making abilities of the partner, and trust in their love and fidelity. Kirscher and Walum (1978) discuss the assumption that a commuter marriage is often perceived by others as permanent or as the first public step toward divorce. Since there is no established social role or social place for the married single, others try to make sense of the commute by viewing it as a stage of marital breakdown.

Success in a commuting marriage appears to be related to maturity and to the stability of the marriage. A deep reservoir of shared experiences, interests, and history to draw upon seems to be important. Another part of maturity is the ability to be independent. "No clinging vine or dependent types need apply." "There needs to be a willingness on both parts to permit a certain degree of autonomy, each must be able to live alone, to perform necessary chores, and to make crisis decisions alone." Self confidence and a sense of self-worth enhance success.

Each must be commited to the success of the commuting arrangement and the relationship must be a high priority. This added attention to the relationship may bring unexpected benefits. More than one person noted that distance makes the heart grow fonder.

CHILDREN AND CHILDCARE

Winfield (1985) notes that 43% of all married mothers with children under six are now in the work force. This is also true of commuters. Sixty-two of the 100 respondents in the study have children. Of these, 26 have adult children. In 14 families, the youngest is a teenager, and in 11 families, the youngest is a pre-schooler. Eleven of the families have 4 or more children while the largest has 8 children.

Where do the children live? The primary home is usually the one in which the children live, particularly if they are of school age. Families with young children handle living arrangements in a variety of ways. While 15 children live with their mothers, half as many live with the father. The parenting role of the father is evident in many commuter families. "My husband volunteered for childcare before the decision was made for two careers." "My husband became a single father and took over most of the childcare tasks. I'm a weekend parent. We try to carry on a normal life." Cooperative parenting and shared decision-making about children is most often voiced. "We worked as a team on childrearing and his share fell more when I was away."

Scanzoni (1978) listed satisfactory childcare arrangements as one of the most frequently mentioned problems in dual careers. However, most survey couples expressed satisfaction that quality care is available both for full-time and after school care. "I have excellent day care near my office, and another woman gives off hour care." Families and relatives may assist if they live nearby. Two of the families have children at live-in boarding schools.

There is no doubt that children create some additional complications. Sick baby care is a problem. "When she is sick, I'm sick". Sometimes children develop symptoms of stress. If problems

arise, particularily in the teen years, the commuting parent may feel out of touch. "We had problems with our junior high son who developed migraine headaches." "Their behavior at times reflected their feelings." Some parents try to minimize potential problems by keeping in touch frequently by phone and through shared decision-making. "I discuss all of our concerns about the children with my husband on the phone, through letters, with close contact with the children on the phone."

While there is no evidence to suggest that this lifestyle is damaging for children, parents are concerned about the effect of commuting on their children. They feel the pressures of disapproval from others and look for indicators of problems in their children. Winfield (1985) suggests that parents need to convince themselves that all is fine. How do they justify their commuter parenting to themselves? Women tend to draw upon the research that shows children of working women score higher in achievement and motivation and on the research that stresses independence in these children (Farris 1978). Parents describe their children as independent, resourceful, and competent. "Our children are very independent and responsible so I can trust them totally." Some commuters note that commuting improves parenting, perhaps because parents take special pains to foster parent child interaction. Quality time, positive role models, and the sense of self-sufficiency and self-worth in children were stressed. There are benefits to both children and parents. "My spouse did not participate in childcare with our kids when they were young. But he now helps immensely." "I developed a new relationship with my children. They became sensitized to the needs of each family member." "There were moments of togetherness with our child that will always be cherished, just the two of us."

One parent is often absent from important events and occasions in the lives of children and the absent parent may feel left out of childrearing. There may be guilt for not being there for activities but parents try to stay as involved as possible in their lives. "I made it a point to get them to Brownies, teacher conferences, piano lessons and do 'normal' things." Mortimer (1978) suggests that parents' inability to fulfill traditional parental roles and a demanding career at the same time leaves a residue of doubt, guilt and concern over their children in the minds of spouses.

Relationships may be strained. "Commuting put a strain on the father-child relationship." Couples with children grapple with guilt and role strain in different ways. Young adjusting couples with children at home have more conflicts over children and domestic responsibilities and must work to strike a satisfactory balance. This stress seems to be strongest for the parent away from the child and increases with younger children (Gertzel and Gross, 1984). Established couples with grown children have cemented the marriage relationship and experience less guilt and anxiety.

Are children a factor for success? Only 7 people mentioned children as a factor of success and only 2 said they are a strong bond in the marriage. Several people recommended not having children or the children be near adulthood before commuting occurs. Some couples delay parenthood because of the commuting. "We want another child, but it is hard to imagine being pregnant with a toddler so we are delaying the second." "We want a child and the biological timeclock is ticking away." Others choose to not to have children because of their lifestyle. "We don't think it is fair to kids to subject them to this lifestyle." Some couples consciously delay one spouse's career. "The change in our lifestyle was delayed until our son completed his education, entered his own career and moved away from home." "My generation were primarily homemakers. It is fortunate that I raised my children and then had a career of my own. I have the best of two worlds."

Agreement about "what we want" and family cooperation in meeting those goals seems to be essential for success. Couples who successfully commute are realists. Most recognize the difficulties they are confronting. They know that they will have strains, guilt, stress, and loneliness to fight. The critical point is that they choose to accept these strains as a part of a lifestyle that fulfills their basic needs and values. For most couples the gains balance the tradeoffs. Through it all, the family and spousal relationships appear to remain intact and alive. The family survives and continues to thrive.

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